

'How to get along with neighbours you don't trust?'

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As new divides and uncertainties are emerging in Europe, we see that neighbouring countries increasingly remain closed off in their own bubbles of communication. Addressing what they see as external threats and striving to forge domestic unity, they speak to the home base. So, Russian leaders play the anti-western card to mobilise the domestic audience. Norwegian leaders speak loudly of 'Russian propaganda' and the need to 'deter Russia' to follow the NATO narrative and speak to *their* domestic audience. This creates internal cohesion, but sends signals of offence across the border, resulting in distrust and rising tension. While Russia and Norway both stated clearly after the war in Ukraine that they did not want the new Russia-West tension to spread to the Arctic, today it is clear that it has. Norway openly speaks of and prepares for hostilities with Russia. Russia for its part recently claimed that Norway is playing an 'active role in all foreign anti-Russian scenarios' and has become 'the frontier of deterrence of Russia'.

And when distrustful neighbours meet, as they have done less often in recent years – it is a dialogue of the deaf. The parties seem to push and amplify their own lists of grievances – self-righteousness is the first sign of conflict. But such lists of grievances, although manipulated, could be listened to. Firstly, because your neighbour will surely act to address what she sees as her own grievances. To disregard what the other party says implies missing important information. It will weaken your knowledge base and make for bad policies. Secondly, some of the points on your neighbour's list of grievances might be legitimate. No party is flawless. Admitting to own past mistakes does not necessarily imply losing face. Rather, you might win the trust of the other. Finally, listening is not only a way of building trust in itself - it also gives an indication of where one might have to compromise.

We see that trust is so low in relations between neighbours that compromising has become off-limits. But compromise does not mean condoning what the other party did. Compromising, giving up on something that the other party wants, does not necessarily mean that 'They' will ask for more, although that is clearly what the parties fear. Willingness to compromise on some point, even if it will imply breaking the national narrative that the other cannot be trusted on any issue, could be a first step towards making the other party trust you have good intentions. For Norway and Russia in the High North the first steps toward rebuilding trust are easiest to take where they have collaborated with success before, such as in the fisheries or in search and rescue operations. These are arenas where they are used to relating with trust and where they both face practical tasks which are better solved through cooperation.

Distrustful relations between neighbours in Europe is a multi-actor game – on all sides – no willingness to meet, listen and compromise will play into the hands of those who want confrontation – on all sides – validating the claim that 'they are out to get us' – pushing the spiral of distrust and conflict further up. Conversely, willingness to meet, listen and compromise will play into the hands of those who want cooperation – on all sides. It will be the first steps out of the current spiral leading to potential confrontation on our continent.